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ABSTRACT

The role of social partner organizations in vocational education and training (VET) has been compared for Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, the Slovak Republic, and Slovenia. In these countries, a system of industrial relations comparable to those existing in western Europe is emerging gradually. Social partnership consists of negotiations between employers' and workers' organizations at different levels. It occurs mainly within tripartite bodies, consisting of government, employer, and employee representatives. A framework of social dialogue has been laid down in most countries and regulates the activities of and interaction between the social partners. In most countries, social partners' participation in the VET system has been established by law that provides for their involvement in initial vocational education at the national level. Themes of the social dialogue include allocating financial resources, developing training and qualification standards, linking training institutions with enterprises, and identifying skill needs and planning training. Ways to develop VET are enhanced interaction between VET and needs of the labor market and economic policy, national measures to develop and manage the VET system, increased participation of social partners in training development, and connection between training and the initial VET system. (The second part of the report contains country summaries that offer an outline of the most important features of the respective national developments.) (YLB)

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Enhancing the role of social partner organisations in the area of vocational education and training in the candidate countries of Central and Eastern Europe

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European Training Foundation



European Training Foundation

Villa Gualino, Viale Settimio Severo, 65, I-10133 Torino

Tel: (39)011 630 22 22 / Fax: (39)011 630 22 00 / email: info@etf.eu.int

Web: <http://www.etf.eu.int>

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A great deal of additional information on the European Union is available on the Internet. It can be accessed through the Europa server (<http://europa.eu.int>).

Cataloguing data can be found at the end of this publication

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Foreword

This publication is an integral part of an on-going pilot project on the role of the social partners in vocational education and training which was launched by the European Training Foundation in 1997 along the lines of the recommendations of its Advisory Forum.

The overall aims of the project are:

- to support the promotion of a social dialogue culture on vocational education and training in the candidate countries of Central and Eastern Europe;
- to contribute to the further development of networking and exchange of experience between social partners from these countries and their counterparts from EU member states;
- to assist in the reinforcement of the institutional capacities of social partners in the candidate countries for developing effective practices of social dialogue in vocational education and training¹.

This publication comprises two parts:

- I. a *comparative overview* of the main trends and challenges with regard to the involvement of social partners in vocational training across the ten candidate countries of Central and Eastern Europe prepared by Professor Jean-Marie Luttringer (Director CIRCE, France) in collaboration with the European Training Foundation
- II. *country summaries* which offer a brief outline of the most important features of the respective national developments.

Both parts are based on a more extensive collection of information in the form of national in depth reports² commissioned by Foundation and carried out by the National Observatories³, in most cases with active support and participation of social partner organisations from all countries⁴.

It should equally be noted that information and analysis presented in the comparative overview has integrated a number of key issues and messages resulting from the discussions during a conference held by the European Training Foundation in December 1997 on the same theme ("Enhancing the role of social partner organisations in the area of VET in the associated countries of Central and Eastern Europe") as a follow-up to the fact-finding phase⁵.

1 More information about this project can be obtained from the European Training Foundation.

2 With the exception of the Slovak Republic where the information presented is taken from documentation prepared by the European Training Foundation in the framework of its preparatory measures activities for the opening of the Leonardo da Vinci Programme to the candidate countries.

3 Further information on the National Observatories project can be obtained directly from the European Training Foundation.

4 The full version of these reports can be downloaded from the Foundation's website on <http://www.etf.eu.int>

5 The proceedings of this conference can also be downloaded from the Foundation's website on <http://www.etf.eu.int>

In an attempt to introduce the key findings and ideas presented in this volume, the following elements should be highlighted:

- In most partner countries social dialogue developed in an unfavourable environment marked by rapid structural transformation, economic decline, growing unemployment, etc. Nevertheless, much progress has been made in all areas towards the establishment of a democratic system of industrial relations (pluralistic and independent representation of interests, freedom of association, development of collective bargaining frameworks, etc).
- The actual transition period is marked by a lack of or a weak level of employee representation in the merging private sector (particularly within SMEs and companies with high levels of foreign investment), a lack of organisation among employers and a strong presence of trade unions in branches or companies which are under State control (which are also characterised by the absence of a clear differentiation between the respective roles and interests of the two sides - employers, workers).
- The urgent need for reform in vocational training systems at the very moment where unions and employers organisations had to establish themselves according to new socio-economic conditions did not create the most suitable context for their involvement in education issues, which are still considered as a low priority for social partners (although some promising signs of change have been noted in this respect). Whereas a number of countries still lack a clear institutional framework enabling the participation of social partners in vocational education and training, a tendency towards the establishment of tripartite structures at national level to deal with vocational education and training issues has been noted. The competence of these tripartite structures is usually a consultative one but in some exceptional cases can be extended to participation in decision-making.
- Although it is widely acknowledged that there is no unique transferable model or method as regards the participation of social partners in vocational training, there is a growing consensus that their involvement can have significant beneficial effects by:
 - creating the conditions to increase the responsiveness (and consequently the effectiveness) of the vocational training system to the socio-economic requirements;
 - enabling a better accommodation of the needs and priorities of both the individual and the enterprise, which can be conducive to a stronger legitimacy and sustainability of the policy options made.
- Reinforcing the social partners' possibilities as well as their motivation for participation have been outlined as two major concerns. In this respect, the development or consolidation of facilitating conditions (establishment of legal-institutional framework, provision of incentives) together with the elaboration of a "continuing training" programme for social partners were highlighted as important steps for speeding up the current "learning process" and fostering their autonomous role.
- Finally the Foundation's facilitating and supporting role was emphasised particularly with regard to the development of further opportunities for exchange and dissemination of good practice, as well as the familiarisation of social partners from candidate countries with European integration matters (especially those related to social policy and employment fields).

The Foundation hopes that this documentation will fulfil the two main purposes for which it has been prepared:

- to constitute a useful practice-oriented instrument for raising awareness among policy makers and social partners in the candidate countries on the importance of vocational education and

training and the value of developing participatory approaches for the further improvement of the vocational training system;

- to be used as an information tool for improving the understanding of EU social partners on the situation in the candidate countries thus creating further opportunities for co-operation with their counterparts in these countries.

Based on the evaluation of this first experience the Foundation intends to launch the debate among all interested parties on the appropriateness and value of a regular updating of the information material included in this publication.

PART I

COMPARATIVE OVERVIEW

Introduction

This comparative overview on the role of social partner organisations in the field of vocational education and training results from an analysis of contributions by nine experts from Central and Eastern European countries; Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovenia. It has been drafted on behalf of European Training Foundation.

It summarises the background developments and changes that have occurred in these countries and that have had a direct influence on the framework and practice of the social dialogue. Particular key issues in the social dialogue on vocational education and training have been identified and observed in the various countries.

The main conclusions and recommendations on the subject of vocational education and training in the reports have been brought together with a view to indicating the prospects for the future.

1. Context and framework of the social dialogue

1. Concept of the social dialogue

A system of industrial relations, which is comparable to those existing in western Europe and which did not exist under the communist regimes, is emerging gradually in the countries involved in the study. Employer organisations and trade unions - in countries where they already existed - have been affected by changes in the structure of ownership and by the complete reorganisation of enterprises. The changing nature of ownership in certain countries is, clearly, a factor which influences the shape of social partner organisations and group interests.

According to the reports, social partnership consists, partly, of negotiations between employers' and workers' organisations at different levels. It takes place, mainly, within tripartite bodies, consisting of government, employer and employee representatives, at various, i.e. local, regional and national, levels. The missions, roles and powers of these bodies differ between countries. They usually have a consultative function but, in general, do not play a key role in the decision-making process. Their views may, however, influence the decisions taken on employment or vocational training issues.

Government representatives are included in the definition of social partners, particularly because of the leading role they play in tripartite bodies. In some countries, such as Romania, NGOs are also included.

The tripartite bodies can be responsible, among others things, for employment policies, the privatisation and restructuring process, unemployment and job creation policies, social issues, such

as the social security system and training policy, such as the purchase of training and the management of resources allocated to it.

They are either constituted by law or created by voluntary agreement between governments and the social partners as is the case in Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland.

In Hungary, the National Vocational Training Council, which was created in 1995, is responsible for preparing decisions, making proposals and expressing opinions on vocational training issues. The Council is composed of representatives of five interest groups - government, employers, employees, local government and economic chambers. Besides the above Council, the National Training Council (NTC), which was set up in 1991 and which, formerly, had decision-making powers on the allocation of vocational training funds, continues to exist. Since 1995, it has operated as a conventional, tripartite, reconciliation committee within the framework of the Interest Reconciliation Council and its main function is to ensure discussion on strategic questions related to training.

In the Czech Republic, the National Council for Social Dialogue is a tripartite body created in October 1990 on the basis of an agreement between the government and the social partners. The Council is both a collective bargaining and an initiative-taking body made up of representatives of trade unions, employers and the government. Its main goal is to promote the social dialogue at the national level and to achieve consensus on the main issues of economic and social development.

Tripartite cooperation is seen, in most cases, as a good way to deal with transition to a market economy. Access to tripartite forms of dialogue and participation in the field of vocational education and training is quite widespread, largely because training is of general interest and importance and is an area in which states want to intervene. Autonomous dialogue between the two sides of industry, by way of collective agreements concluded at branch or enterprise levels, is beginning slowly to emerge but, as yet, this does not seem to be the major form of social dialogue. When social dialogue does take place at these levels, it does not, in general, deal with vocational education and training. It focuses, rather, on issues such as working conditions, wages, employment issues, such as the integration of young people (Bulgaria, Romania, Lithuania) into the labour market or measures to combat unemployment.

2. Economic and social context of the social dialogue

The effects of transition towards a market economy vary according to the economic and political situation in the different countries. Each country also displays its own particular patterns and features.

In general, it should be noted that, over the past few years, Central and Eastern European countries have been faced with the challenge of restructuring and adapting their economies. Economic transformation, by way of liberalisation of prices and privatisation, is still in progress in all the countries considered.

The main problem is that there is no adequate reference point to guide the adaptation of these systems to the new requirements of a free market economy and there is little certainty about their prospects for development. Their vocational education and training systems will, therefore, have to evolve in a context of uncertainty about future economic trends and needs.

As far as human resources are concerned, problems have arisen in the context of structural adjustment, privatisation of the economy and the lack of a suitably trained workforce and, with these, has emerged the need for a different kind of vocational education and training system, one which is more responsive to the new economic conditions which, sometimes, include a high rate of unemployment.

In countries where the level of unemployment is high, most financial and institutional resources are devoted to employment issues. Vocational education and training tends to be a low priority issue. On the other hand, in countries like the Czech Republic, where the unemployment rate is relatively low (around 4%), there is a keen debate on the reform of vocational education and training.

Education and training have, themselves, undergone considerable changes, such as the growth of private education, the emergence of new skill areas and changes in the structure of education. The main change is that, unlike the previous situation, training is now closely connected to economic efficiency.

The social partners would appear to have a considerable part to play in the ongoing process of economic and social change. The emergence of a market economy has created new opportunities for them to intervene on key issues.

The various reports show that the social dialogue and tripartite or bipartite relations have made significant progress and this could have an impact on social and economic development. The state no longer has a complete monopoly of vocational education and training and this has created a certain amount of space for the social dialogue.

During the transition period, almost all the countries moved towards greater decentralisation of their vocational education and training systems. This change, together with the decreasing role of the state, facilitated the constitution of structures representing group interests and, in some countries, such as Hungary, Poland and Slovenia, definitely contributed to the emergence of the social dialogue.

The conditions for social dialogue are, therefore, being created, even though, for most countries, the concept and practice of social partnership are still rather new.

3. Actors involved

Pluralist structures are being developed in all the countries involved. The activity of trade unions and employers' organisations is based very much on the principle of free association, which has only recently been recognised or enforced. These organisations and, in some cases, the government too take part in negotiations and collective bargaining or participate in consultative bodies at the national level. In some countries, to do this, they must meet certain legally established conditions or criteria including registration criteria, independence from governments or political parties, minimum number of members, etc.

The Polish report highlights a characteristic, which is also evident in other countries and that is that both employers' and workers' organisations are highly fragmented and are not homogenous. Neither trade unions nor employers' or craft associations have the administrative structures to facilitate the efficient development of the capacity and expertise necessary to participate effectively in institutionalised partnership. Consequently, their ability to represent their members and to become engaged in a meaningful social dialogue is often insufficient and their legitimacy questionable.

- **Employers** are organised, on a sectoral basis, either in trade chambers or in professional organisations in order to cooperate and enforce their interests within their sectors.

The conditions for the creation and registration of employer organisations, which are created on a voluntary basis and which represent employers in collective bargaining at the national level, are regulated by law in the countries studied.

A particular point of interest, in the case of Central and Eastern European countries, is the emergence of trade chambers, non-governmental bodies whose activities are also regulated by law. They represent the interests of employers, and provide services, in the fields of training, retraining and employment or information provision. For instance, the law on the Economic Chamber of the Czech Republic provides that the chambers should "organise training activity and cooperate with the administrative authorities of the state in their task of ensuring that information services, vocational training and retraining are provided and in their efforts to solve problems of employment".

In Estonia, employees can also be members of the chambers.

- **Workers'** interests are represented by trade unions that can be active at national, regional, branch or enterprise level. The number of trade unions varies from country to country. In all countries, except Latvia, however, the trade union movement tends to be made up of a number of different federations. In some countries, such as Slovenia where trade unions are connected to political parties, workers' organisations are highly fragmented and this tends to make the social dialogue cumbersome.

In enterprises where workers' interests are not represented or not well represented, most frequently SMEs and foreign businesses, no negotiations with trade unions take place. Working conditions, as well as access to training, are determined, in these cases, either by the provisions of the labour code in force in the country, or by the internal social policy of the company.

4. Development of the framework of social dialogue in general

A framework of laws on trade unions, employer associations, collective bargaining, tripartite bodies and education and/or training has been laid down in most of the countries under review. This framework regulates the activities of the social partners and the interaction between them and has created the conditions for the consolidation of pluralism and the development of democratic industrial relations systems.

Social partnership can operate through collective bargaining, leading to bipartite agreements at national, regional or sectoral level, or through participation in tripartite bodies. Tripartism has, in fact, emerged as the leading form of social dialogue.

In some countries, such as Bulgaria, the social partners have agreed a charter of social partnership whereby they commit themselves to cooperate. Even though such charters do not have binding effect, they can encourage the development of social partnership.

The practice of social partnership, however, differs from one country to another. In some countries, such as Lithuania, social partnership is developed more at the national than at local (enterprise or regional) levels where a lack of strong representation and a low level of involvement of some organisations mean that the social partners are not sufficiently active. This creates obvious problems in the implementation of social or employment policies at the local level.

In other countries, such as Poland, the social dialogue is better developed at the local level.

One of the main impediments to the development of the social dialogue is a lack of clarity about the representativeness of social partner organisations. This is true for almost all the countries studied. In several cases, the forms and criteria of representativeness, especially for employer organisations, still need to be established. In some countries, such as Estonia, the question of representativeness and of legal representation is not regulated by law. Other legislatures, including those of Romania,

Bulgaria and the Czech Republic, have tackled this issue but the legitimacy of social partner organisations, in their representative function, seems to be unstable or insufficiently established.

This could be one reason why the social partners do not play a sufficiently prominent role in Central and Eastern European countries, even though there is a broad, emerging consensus in most countries on the importance of the role they have to play in the fields of employment and training.

5. *Framework of the social dialogue on vocational training*

In most countries, the participation of the social partners in the vocational education and training system has been established by law. It should be borne in mind, however, that what the laws in question, particularly the education laws, provide for is the involvement of the social partners in the field of initial vocational education at the national level. This is an area and a level where social partnership is encouraged. In Slovenia and Lithuania, for example, the laws on vocational education and training lay down that two-thirds of the members of the national Vocational Education and Training Councils, created by these laws, will be representatives of the social partners. Nevertheless, the state, in many countries, tends to retain control of vocational education and training. The prerogatives of the Ministries of Education in some countries are a case in point in this regard.

The social dialogue on continuing training issues can take place through negotiation or through dialogue within tripartite bodies dealing with employment policy as a whole or with training itself.

In some countries, the law provides for the cooperation of the social partners only in some restricted fields, but some of these, such as employment policy, may include training issues. In the Czech Republic, however, the involvement of the social partners in vocational training is not yet provided for by law, notwithstanding recent sustained efforts to introduce social partnership in this area.

The actual involvement of social partners in vocational education and training issues is considered to be low by most of the reports. Social partnership is seen as a new form of cooperation that did not exist in the previous systems but is expected to develop.

There are, however, some recent instances of particular initiatives and spontaneous partnerships, especially at local levels, which favour the emergence of a dialogue between the social partners. The involvement of social partners in these is entirely voluntary. One example is a working group, in the form of a consultative body, which was set up in the Czech Republic to tackle, among other things, the issue of the financing of secondary vocational schools. Cooperation may emerge on one level rather than another because of particular regional or local conditions and is heavily dependent on the good will of the partners or the commitment of a particular organisation such as, for example, the Association of Polish Craft Chambers.

Employers and trade unions can also cooperate at company level within the framework of collective bargaining, which is usually regulated by law. In this case, the content and quality of the partnership depends on the particular sector and the size of the company, its workforce and resources. The reports mention the role of social dialogue within companies but, unfortunately, do not give detailed information on this issue.

On the other hand, the will to develop bipartite agreements at the branch level is evident, but this is not yet a generally established practice in Central and Eastern European countries.

In conclusion, training is rarely a subject of negotiation, partly because the training needs are not clearly identified. The involvement of the social partners and the identification of labour market needs are closely connected, according to most reports. This area of negotiation is expected to develop as new market conditions create an increasing demand for training and skills upgrading.

The particular case of continuing vocational training

The continuing vocational training systems of the countries included in this report have undergone drastic changes since the beginning of the 1990s. The numbers of trainees, both jobseekers and employed persons, and of training organisations, especially private organisations, have increased. New forms of continuing training emerged as training systems responded, in a relatively spontaneous fashion, to the sudden changes in supply and demand on the labour market and in the structure of employment.

The legal and institutional framework of continuing vocational training has been reformed in some countries as a corollary of recent changes in the national bodies responsible for employment and vocational training. The adoption of new laws is seen as a way of speeding up the development of continuing vocational training and, in some cases, Romania and Lithuania in particular, these have also aimed at encouraging the involvement of the social partners in the field of adult education. The country reports do not mention the access of individuals to training, which is one of the main issues in the social dialogue in Western Europe.

Adult education is now closely connected to the needs of the labour market and this means that training systems need to be managed more effectively than before. The reports insist on several factors which are urgently required in order to stimulate or maintain the development of continuing training:

- the introduction of legislation, designed, for instance, to support the development of continuing vocational training in enterprises through incentives (Czech Republic);
- better coordination and cooperation among the actors involved, especially during the transition phase (Bulgaria), and the increased involvement of the social partners;
- closer cooperation between initial vocational education and training and adult education and training (Latvia);
- the dissemination of information on in-company training and on training organised by private institutions (Estonia, Poland);
- the involvement of the social partners in training for the unemployed (Latvia); and
- the development of the social dialogue at a sectoral level in states which are still highly centralised.

II. Themes of the social dialogue

1. Allocation of financial resources

The development of training has been rather uneven over the past few years and has not always been coordinated on a national level. The financing of training, however, is often considered a central issue in the social dialogue.

Continuing training is financed either by companies or by the public authorities at national or local levels. The former consists of training for company staff and the latter, mainly, of training for unemployed young people and takes place in training organisations. Individuals can also pay for their own training. The latter is considered to be a significant development and a reflection of the way people have been made more responsible for their own personal development and careers since the end of the communist regimes. Finally, international organisations contribute to the funding of training through education or training assistance programmes.

The responsibilities of the social partners with regard to financing training vary across the different components of the system, i.e. according to whether they are dealing with initial training within the education system or with training people who are already on the labour market.

The social partners can be involved in negotiating the financial resources devoted to training at the company or branch level, if the social dialogue exists at these levels. They can also negotiate the allocations from the state budget for initial education. Social dialogue on financing can take place in bodies which are concerned with employment, unemployment or training if the social partners have a role to play in the management of the resources of these bodies. In Bulgaria, for instance, the social partners are responsible for the supervision of the allocation of resources.

The national reports point out that several factors have contributed, over the past few years, to changing the way training is financed. These factors, which are also considered to have a strong impact on the development of the financial resources allocated to training in general, include:

- the development of a "training market", such as has emerged in the Czech Republic where there has been a marked increase in the number of training institutes since the beginning of the 1990s;
- an increase in the level of investment by employers in training (Latvia);
- the creation of a vocational training or labour market fund (Hungary, Poland and Lithuania) for the purpose of improving funding mechanisms. In some countries, such as Romania, the creation of funds devoted to training is being debated but, in most of the other countries, the existing funds or funds now being set up are devoted to employment issues and are jointly financed by the state and enterprises. In certain cases, such as Lithuania, a contribution from the employees is also levied. A minor part of these resources is ear-marked for training. The issue for the Central and Eastern European countries to decide is whether it is best to tackle the issue of financing by increasing the resources allocated to training or by setting up training funds.

Factors that are frequently referred to as obstacles to the development of funds for, and the social dialogue on, training are a lack of incentives to companies, their staff or individuals and a lack of resources in SMEs.

There have, however, been some positive developments in this field. One example is the Estonian law which allows some of the money spent on training to be offset against tax. When this amendment to the law was introduced, there was a huge increase in enrolment in short-term courses organised by private training organisations in Estonian firms.

In Lithuania, changes which will improve the mechanisms for financing vocational training through the provision of loans to individuals, are in the course of preparation.

For the majority of the countries involved in the study, companies still have very little interest in investing in training. The precarious economic situation of most of them as well as the fact that they have access to a supply of cheap labour, especially in countries with high unemployment rates, are the main reasons put forward to explain this. The Bulgarian report states that "both the state and private employers, with few exceptions, depend on the drastic imbalances and huge oversupply of manpower on the labour market. They invest practically nothing in vocational training for their employees".

On the issue of the allocation of resources, the following comments were made by the social partners from Central and Eastern European countries during the seminar held on 15 and 16 December 1997, in Turin:

- the social partners acknowledge that investment in training is a specific type of intangible investment and that it is a requirement for competitiveness at individual, company and national levels;
- the participants emphasise that the responsibility for investment in training lies with each of the parties involved. The financing of training is, therefore, a matter of co-investment and co-responsibility. The social partners recognise that they have a key role to play in promoting investment in training by individuals and companies. They can do this by creating the conditions that will ensure negotiation on this issue, both inside and outside companies; and
- the need for further exchanges of experiences on the question of financing mechanisms, i.e. on the financial techniques used by companies, training funds and individuals who finance their own training, especially those which involve the social partners, was stressed by the social partners themselves.

2. Development of training and qualification standards

As far as the development of training and qualification standards is concerned, the difficulties experienced include: the lack of standardisation of vocational programmes, which is particularly acute in situations where there is a growing number of training organisations; lack of information, such as data on skills requirements for certain occupations; and the consequent lack of awareness and recognition, especially by employers.

For the states involved, the main difficulty lies in implementing a system that allows for both the comparability of curricula and the autonomy of institutions delivering training in a local context. This can be illustrated by the case of the Czech Republic, which has developed a "two-level curriculum" system that takes both these considerations into account.

Schools and training institutions seem to have an important part to play in the development of qualification and training standards, especially as far as proposals for new diplomas or qualifications are concerned.

Some countries have introduced laws to tackle this issue. Hungary has set up a national Vocational Qualification Register where the social partners also have a role to play. In Slovenia, the new vocational education and training legislation includes procedures for the development of occupational standards. Other countries, like Bulgaria, are still without legislation to regulate standards or to establish a system of qualifications. In Estonia, however, some sectors have started to create their own vocational standards.

The involvement of the social partners in the development of qualifications and educational standards is relatively low. In certain cases, this is due, mainly, to the fact that there is no culture of involvement of this kind and that the social partners do not have much knowledge in the area. In other cases, it is the result of the underdevelopment of the legal framework which does not provide sufficient incentives for them to tackle vocational education and training issues. The Bulgarian and Lithuanian reports both recommend greater involvement of the social partners, especially on the employer side. If employers were made responsible for determining qualification needs, this would lead to changes in the current situation where employers are not able to provide reliable information on the general, i.e. macro, level.

In countries which already have a reliable occupation classification system, there is partial involvement of the social partners. This is the case in Latvia, where employers are involved in the development of qualification and training standards.

It is still very difficult for purchasers of training, be they companies or public institutions, to adopt standard criteria for the selection of training providers. It is apparent, from the reports, that standardisation is difficult to introduce.

2.1 *The specific issue of quality assurance and accreditation of vocational training*

The increasing number of training institutions and the increasing demand for training has made it necessary to introduce assessment measures and quality control of training.

The bodies responsible for the assessment and control of initial training differ from country to country but are usually set up under the Ministry of Education. The methods and means of assessment of training are still being devised. Projects have also been set up to provide information on the training that is on offer. The social partners are sometimes involved in the assessment process to the extent that representatives of employers or employees, usually at the branch level, sit on assessment committees. They can also take part as members of the jury in final examinations in vocational schools, e.g. in the Czech Republic. Some reports, such as that on Latvia, insist that increased cooperation with the social partners on this issue is particularly desirable.

As far as continuing vocational training is concerned, the process seems to be less formal. The assessment of the quality of training programmes or training institutions can depend on individual projects, such as that set up by the Czech National Training Fund to assess the quality of training programmes for managers. Surveys are also carried out to measure the results of training in terms of the integration or reintegration of trainees, particularly the unemployed, into the labour market (Poland, Latvia).

Accreditation of vocational training programmes and institutions is the responsibility of government ministries and the agreement or advice of the social partners is not always required as a guarantee of quality or relevance. In some countries, such as Poland, the development of an accreditation system is still underway.

European or international standards are used to provide classification and skill specifications in some countries, e.g. Poland, Slovenia and Lithuania. However, according to certain reports, such as that on Poland, these are not applied in their entirety by training institutions.

the development of recognition systems, which are not limited to individual sectors, is necessary to ensure transferability of skills and the mobility of the workforce.

On the issue of the development of qualification standards and the accreditation of skills, the following comments were made by the social partners from the Central and Eastern European countries during the seminar, held on 15 and 16 December 1997, in Turin:

- the involvement of the social partners in recognition procedures increases the trainees' chances of employment;
- the development of recognition systems, which are not limited to individual sectors, is necessary to ensure transferability of skills and the mobility of the workforce;
- social partners' involvement should be ensured from the very beginning of the recognition process;
- there is no single method or model for involving social partners in vocational education and training but it is crucial that their involvement is ensured in all the Central and Eastern European countries;
- the validation even of formally recognised qualifications in the employment system is a crucial area for social partner activity, at sector or enterprise level and should be ensured at sectoral or enterprise level; and
- further opportunities to exchange experiences between EU and Central and Eastern European countries on the issue of development of qualification standards and accreditation of skills are recommended.

3. Linking training institutions with enterprises

The importance of getting companies involved in the vocational education and training system is a high priority in most countries. Cooperation between companies and schools, which is usually encouraged or provided for by law (Latvia, Romania), tends to develop slowly at national, regional and sectoral levels (Czech Republic, Latvia), though it has the potential to have a positive impact on the forms and means of social dialogue.

Practical training in companies varies according to the type of qualification pursued and the kind of educational institution, i.e. secondary vocational schools, technical schools or higher education institution, attended. In some countries, practical training provides an established framework for cooperation between local companies, on the one hand, and schools or training institutions, on the other. In others, such as Estonia, this type of cooperation is only beginning to emerge.

The issue of cooperation between companies and training institutions is also closely connected to the situation of training in SMEs. Most of the reports point out that upgrading qualifications is often not a matter of concern to SMEs where training, if it exists at all, is seen as a short-term or one-off solution to specific skill deficiencies (Lithuania, Poland, Slovenia and Bulgaria). The reports quote lack of funds, the absence of a "training culture" and the difficulties some SMEs have in replacing employees during training periods as reasons for this.

The emergence of SMEs calls for a radical rethink of the entire issue of vocational education and training in the countries concerned. In the former economic systems, there were huge companies which pursued their own training policies. These are no longer operational and, in the new context, there is a growth in the number of SMEs, which do not have the same resources as large companies and for which training is not an immediate priority.

The social dialogue is expected to provide opportunities and means of improving the links between training institutions and companies, especially during the transition period, when the connections between the labour market and vocational training have yet to be identified and defined. The growing number of SMEs and the development of services are also likely to have a strong impact on the demand for training.

4. Identification of skill needs and planning of training

There are a number of difficulties associated with the identification of skills needs and the planning of training in the partner countries. Although it is considered to be necessary, planning of training, when it does take place, is based, primarily, on an immediate and ad hoc estimation of the main trends in the labour market. The experts identify various factors that add to the difficulties.

One is the lack of an adequate labour market information or forecasting system. In Estonia and Poland, for instance, the social partners and the Ministry of Education, have embarked on the creation of such a system. A related difficulty is that the prospects for the development of the economy are not at all clear (Bulgaria). Even when information systems do exist, the data or information they provide may be insufficient as far as these prospects are concerned. This is the case in the Czech Republic.

Another is the importance of the SME sector, where no planning of training is possible since the planning of training needs is of concern only to large enterprises, in some national economic systems.

However, the reports describe some experiments that have taken place, especially on a sectoral or regional level, to identify future skills requirements within a given professional sector or region. In Estonia, for example, projects of this kind were carried out in the construction and the hotel and tourism sectors. It is expected that these experiments will be followed up by sectoral or regional training programmes. Slovenian regional councils for vocational education and training also work on the establishment of links between education and the labour market in accordance with the guidelines of the regional economic policy.

Some professional sectors - construction is often quoted in the reports - are eager to find qualified workers on the market and are, therefore, interested in the issue of planning and in the forecasting of skills needs.

Studies to identify qualification needs and labour market main trends have also been conducted in Romania, Hungary, Lithuania and the Czech Republic.

The reports stress the need for enhanced interaction between the planning of vocational training and needs of the labour market. This is clearly an issue which can trigger dialogue between the social partners at national, sectoral or enterprise level.

Ministries are often confronted with this issue, as they are, for example in the Czech Republic, but the social partners are not involved in the decision-making process.

On the issue of the analysis of labour market skill requirements and the assessment of related training needs, the following comments were made by the social partners from the Central and Eastern European countries during the seminar held on 15 and 16 December 1997 in Turin:

- the situation in the labour market can best be assessed and its needs addressed jointly by the state and the social partners;
- the social partners should start by taking on concrete tasks and responsibilities and the delegation of power will follow;
- simple tools should be used to facilitate dialogue on training needs at the enterprise level;
- the provision of training to meet labour market needs depends on the availability of resources;
- the training supply needs to be able to respond flexibly to the increasingly complex and evolving demand; and
- a balance needs to be struck between meeting local labour market needs and conforming to a national framework.

III. Prospects for the future

The reports indicate ways and means of developing vocational education and training in the different countries. They also identify conditions for the development of social partnership and for improving the social dialogue on the issue of education and training. An analysis of the contexts and forms of representation of social and economic interests show that impediments to the social dialogue on vocational education and training still exist in the countries concerned, even though there are some positive changes, such as the emergence of tripartite structures and forms of participation. The powers and responsibilities of the social partners, in countries where they have acquired a role, are still limited to representation in advisory or consultative bodies.

The main focus of the social dialogue tends to be on matters other than training, such as wages, and working conditions.

1. Enhanced interaction between vocational education and training and the needs of the labour market and economic policy

Enhanced interaction between vocational education and training and the needs of the labour market is often identified, in the reports, as a way of improving the system, its transparency and visibility. Training needs should be regularly assessed with regard to the constraints, priorities and guidelines imposed by the economic situation and the direction of employment policy (Czech Republic). To this end, it is necessary to develop information systems on current and future requirements and on the supply of, and demand for, different skills on the labour market (Poland, Lithuania). There is also a need for a broad definition of training needs. The involvement of employers in the determination of training needs is of particular importance.

The training requirements of employers should be identified through scientific research or surveys (Hungary).

According to some reports (Lithuania), the integration of vocational education and training into labour market strategies is likely to introduce a degree of flexibility which will meet the requirements of the changing economies.

The reports also link the question of the connections between employment and training to cooperation between enterprises, on the one hand, and training and educational institutions, on the other.

2. Implementation of national measures to develop and manage the vocational education and training system

Although most of the reports agree that measures to develop the vocational education and training system should be introduced on the national level, they have different opinions on how to improve the management of the system. Certain reports stress that harmonisation with European Union practices and models is an important consideration.

Most reports insist that a framework, which enables broad participation, is a prerequisite for sound management of the vocational education and training system. Some countries are moving towards

the adoption of a framework agreement and a legal framework on vocational education and training. The successful development of the vocational education and training system and the installation of suitable management structures are seen to depend on the implementation of an appropriate strategy, the identification of priorities regarding training and, in some cases, the establishment of a specific institution to coordinate policies deriving from these priorities.

Some reports emphasise the central role played by the way the financing of the training system is regulated. Hungary, for instance, proposes to modify the financing system of vocational training and the Lithuanian experts put forward the trade unions' request that the financing of vocational education and training institutions be improved.

Other reports (Czech Republic, Poland) propose the introduction or development of incentives, such as tax exemptions for employers involved in training programmes, to support the expected development of vocational training and to enhance the effectiveness of pro-active employment measures, including training activities (Poland).

3. Increased participation of social partners in the development of training

The participation of the social partners in vocational education and training is expected to increase. According to the reports, this will be made possible by a redistribution of powers and responsibilities among the actors involved in human resource development, but only on condition that the structures supporting the social dialogue and the forms of participation in these are modified. The social partners themselves should, therefore, endeavour to raise awareness of the potential benefits of this participation within their own organisations (Czech Republic, Romania).

Many of the reports (Hungary, Lithuania, Romania, Bulgaria and Latvia) also insist that the provision of training for the social partners themselves would be a way of developing the social dialogue and there are repeated demands for programmes designed to improve the forms, means and methods of social partnership.

The redistribution of responsibilities between the state, employers and employees is also strongly recommended by some reports. Some (Lithuania, Estonia) stress that employers' organisations expect the state to support and guarantee their efforts.

The increased involvement of the social partners in the development of training seems to depend on their capacity to increase and improve cooperation between them and training organisations and between the social partners themselves in bodies where social partnership has been established or is likely to emerge, Bulgaria and Lithuania, for instance. It is also heavily dependent on a clear definition of roles, rights and the place of the social partners in the system (Lithuania). In general, cooperation between training institutions and the social partners is developing but it is not yet always considered satisfactory (Latvia).

An autonomous, bilateral role for the social partners is also expected to develop at either company, branch (Latvia) or national levels. In countries where it does not exist (Bulgaria), the conclusion of a national agreement between the social partners on the subject of training is seen as necessary.

4. *Connection between training and the initial vocational education and training system.*

Some reports consider the connection between training and the system of initial vocational education to be insufficient and improved connections are strongly recommended. Most reports underline the lack of interaction between schools and enterprises. The social dialogue, with the active involvement of the employers, could increase the responsiveness of the education and training system to the requirements of enterprises.

PART II

COUNTRY SUMMARIES

Bulgaria

The negative tendencies at work in the economy and the lack of sufficiently trained human resources and expertise have led to a disruption of training mechanisms and an erosion of the vocational education and training system. The situation has been exacerbated by the lack of adequate reference points and the incapacity of the system to adapt to the requirements of a market environment.

Investment in human resource development still tends to be limited and this, in turn, affects both the efficient use of productive labour and labour mobility.

One positive development is that the social dialogue and tripartite relations have made tangible progress, both institutionally and as a mechanism for steering and influencing social and economic processes.

The institutional framework that has been established and the legislation that has been enacted, however, are only a starting point for giving meaning to the operation of existing institutions, improving coordination between them, establishing new specialised bodies such as the Accreditation Agency and, in general, involving non-governmental organisations more efficiently in the implementation of vocational education and training reform at various levels.

The social dialogue and social partnership have gained in experience over time and, in so doing, have extended their scope and content, promoted forms and means of action and updated and specified their objectives in response to the dynamic changes in conditions, needs and specific interests that have emerged in the transition to a market economy.

At the national level and with regard to vocational training, cooperation consists, above all, of the formulation of advice on vocational education and training policies in the form of framework agreements, strategy planning and work on the regulatory framework in the context of the Supervisory Board of the National Employment Service, the Committee on the Labour Force (operating within the framework of the National Council for Tripartite Co-operation), the National Board of Education as well as The National Consultative Council on Employment and Social Policy.

The forms of social partnership in vocational training need to be developed and diversified. Interaction between the social partners should be improved at all levels, but particularly at the level of local (regional, municipal etc.) social partnership bodies, which need to develop practical solutions geared to the specific demands of local labour markets.

To this end, there is an urgent need to conclude a national agreement between the social partners covering: the relationship between training and working life (focusing on enterprises); the intensification of continuing and further education; the involvement of the social partners in elaborating, modifying, implementing and evaluating training policies; the entry of disadvantaged groups to the labour market; the promotion of research and the systematisation of employment and

training statistics and analysis. To achieve this, however, the participants in the social dialogue system will themselves need a considerable amount of training.

The long-term success of training schemes depends on how far policy-makers and the social partners involved are willing to consider and take on board the principle of administrative subsidiarity.

One way to contain the erosion or complete lack of enterprise-based training is to promote community-based training through the establishment of local partnerships, supported by the efforts of regional tripartite councils with the assistance of the municipalities and the business support centres.

Czech Republic

At the national level, the social dialogue is mainly conducted in the **National Council for Social Dialogue of the Czech Republic**, which was set up in October 1990. The Council is a tripartite body, which was established, not by law, but on the basis of an agreement between the government and social partners. Its main aim is to engage in voluntary tripartite bargaining and to propose initiatives with a view to reaching consensus on the principal issues of economic and social development. The results of the Council's negotiations are not legally binding but they can be incorporated into legal regulations.

As regards the specific area of vocational education and training, the law currently regulating the management of initial vocational training at the national level **does not make it possible for the social partners to participate fully in vocational education and training policy**. Nor does it facilitate the forging of links between training policy, on the one hand and employment and economic policy, on the other. The result is that some crucial aspects of vocational education and training, such as, for example, standards and the system of study branches, do not respond sufficiently to the needs of employers and employees. Furthermore, the current system does not provide effective tools, such as participation in the management and financing of the vocational education and training, that would enable the social partners to influence the development of vocational education and training.

The system of continuing vocational training has not yet been properly linked with that of initial vocational training and its own development is not sufficiently coordinated. Effective incentives, supporting the development of various forms of continuing vocational training, have not yet been introduced. The current laws provide only limited possibilities for the social partners to influence particular issues in this regard (for example, the law on employment contains provisions on the involvement of the social partners in the state employment policy).

Although there is no legal framework to involve the social partners in vocational training, some cases of **spontaneous cooperation** do occur, most frequently, at the **local**, i.e. the school, level. Some headmasters of vocational schools have established **school councils**, consultative bodies on which local enterprises and the Labour Office are represented.

On the company level, employers and trade unions cooperate in the **continuing vocational training** of workers in some, especially the larger, enterprises. Cooperation is usually based on collective agreements, which sometimes contain a section on training.

Involvement of the social partners in vocational education and training can no longer be seen as a **national** issue only. In view of the possible accession of the Czech Republic to European Union, it has also acquired an **international** dimension.

The introduction of a comprehensive system of social partnership in vocational training will help to **improve the quality of vocational training**. It should, therefore, be considered as one of the priorities of vocational education and training policy in the coming years.

On the basis of these conclusions, a number of **recommendations** were put forward:

- On the national level, it is proposed to establish an inter-sectoral **National Council for Vocational Training**, which would be made up of representatives of state institutions, employers and employees. This Council would function as a consultative body to the Minister for Education on vocational education and training issues.

- The setting up of **sectoral** bodies on the national level is also proposed. These would correspond to the principal economic sectors and their main task would be to assure the relevance of the aims and contents and the quality of vocational training in these sectors.
- On the **regional level**, it is recommended that some school offices be transformed into **regional offices for vocational training** with decision-making competence, in certain fields, such as the network of vocational schools, the coordination of the structure of branches and students, quality control and the allocation of financial resources. These offices should operate in areas larger than regions. It is also proposed to establish a regional council for vocational training, which would include representatives of the social partners.
- On the **local level**, it is proposed that the representation of employers on the council of vocational schools be made obligatory.

Finally, it is proposed that the **legislative amendments** necessary to introduce a system of social partnership in vocational training be prepared as soon as possible.

Estonia

The participation of the social partners in vocational education and training is regulated, on the one hand, by national legislation and, on the other, by the charters and action plans of the partners themselves. Most of the social partners see training, including vocational/professional training, as part of their remit and refer to it in their charters. Training activities take place concurrently on different levels. Employers try to ensure that the necessary standards of proficiency of the training programmes are reached by concluding related agreements with the training institutions. In addition employers' associations organise training on their own initiative addressed to their affiliated members.

Cooperation between the larger production enterprises and the educational institutions, which offer practical vocational/professional training, has proved to be quite satisfactory. Both parties have been able to take account of one another's needs and of the development of entrepreneurial activities.

The involvement of the social partners in the administrative bodies of educational institutions, which facilitates a convergence of the interests of enterprises and educational institutions, has evolved through legislation and the overall development of social partner activity. The weakness of the present arrangements is that the organisation and financing of training are not sufficiently flexible.

Employers' associations and trade unions need to prepare themselves better to deal with vocational/professional education and training. They should help to define the vocational/professional standards, to which training in the various sectors must conform and, in so doing, take the needs of enterprises into account. They should also be involved in finding resources to fund the necessary level of training. Cooperation could make a more extended and sustainable use of resources possible.

There is no national body ensuring the joint representation of social partners, key government ministries, education and other national interest groups. Some employer organisations are taking part in the Phare vocational education and training reform programme. According to the 1995 Law on Vocational Education Schools, Vocational/Professional Councils are in the process of being established to enable the Ministry of Education to consult with social partners in order to adjust vocational education and training to requirements and needs of the labour market. The Estonian Chamber of Commerce and Industry coordinates this process with the participation of the other social partners. The first Vocational/Professional Councils at sectoral level have already been set up. They define vocational/professional and occupation-related qualification requirements and make proposals to the Minister of Education on the approval of national vocational/professional programmes in their sectors.

The systematic organisation of continuing training and complementary training is acquiring increasing importance. The initiative in this has been taken, primarily, by specific vocational/professional associations, for whom the issues of qualifications and skill proficiency are particularly important.

In addition, social partners have been involved in several other educational bodies; they are represented in the Education Forum, in vocational/professional school councils, etc.

In the framework of the vocational education reform programme supported by Phare in Estonia, a group of key players has emerged among the social partners and these have identified the main problems in vocational/professional education and put forward proposals for dealing with them. Their work facilitates communication and discussion on vocational/professional education issues among interested parties and helps involve new partners in the process of reform and development.

Hungary

It is only recently that a system of industrial (labour) relations comparable to that of industrialised market economies has emerged in Hungary.

Now, in contrast to previous decades, there are independent actors representing the differing interests of the labour market. Free collective bargaining is gaining roots at enterprise and branch levels, while mechanisms and institutions of tripartite social dialogue are also present. New laws adopting the relevant international legal instruments have been passed to provide a basis for industrial relations.

These developments have taken the form of a *gradual process* rather than a sudden change, contrary to the experience of many other Central Eastern European countries. Nevertheless, it is still early to speak of a fully-fledged, consolidated model of industrial relations. What Hungary now has is more *a mixture of the heritage from the late 1980s and the current, deliberate steps* towards genuine social partnership adequate to mirror the conditions of a market economy.

The tripartite reconciliation of interests has emerged as a predominant form of social partnership in Hungary.

Institutions of social partnership have also been established in the field of vocational education. In Hungary, social partners have an advisory role in the development of vocational training policies and in the distribution of funds for practical training, according to legislation. The participation of social partners, embedded in the legal framework, is ensured through their representation on the National Vocational Training Council. The Chambers of Economy are responsible for practical training and final examinations.

Despite the basically positive attitude of social partners towards this institutional framework, a number of problems have been noted in the everyday implementation and co-operation, related mainly to the following developments:

- a) compared to the situation in 1992-93 the authority of social partners in 1996-97 is more limited. The National Vocational Training Council is not authorised to make decisions, but is only an advisory body to the minister.
- b) with the creation of chambers, the competencies of voluntary employers' organisations were restricted. Formerly they had had the right to send a representative to examination committees. This competence was taken away from them. Trade unions object to not being allowed to have such a competence neither in the past or now.
- c) the relationship between the newly established National Vocational Training Council and the previous National Training Council should be regulated in an unambiguous way.

Social partners find it essential that they broaden their scope of knowledge - in terms of raising their awareness of cooperation (between social partners) practices in the EU as well as improving their foreign language skills - in order to ensure effective co-operation and work.

They also attach great importance and priority to the identification of labour market needs and the improvement of the financing arrangements in the field of vocational training

Latvia

Latvia, like other Eastern European countries, does not have a long tradition of social dialogue. Under the socialist regime, the entire system of social protection was highly centralised and regulated. Many changes have occurred in the new independent Republic of Latvia and basic principles for creating social dialogue have been established by several legislative measures.

The social partner organisations - Free Trade Union Federation (LBAS) and the Latvian Employers' Confederation (LDDK) - were established after independence. These organisations take part in the preparation of new legislation in the field of social policy through their participation in the Tripartite Consultative Council which operates at national level.

In some cases, local government authorities have set up local tripartite councils, which participate in the development of regional employment policy programmes and the training of the unemployed in their administrative areas.

An analysis of the present state of involvement of the social partners in vocational education and training shows that it is at an initial stage of development and not yet sufficient in particular at the branch or enterprise levels.

One reason for this could be related to a lack of information and interest on all sides, but it is more likely to be due to a misunderstanding of the role and significance of the social partners in vocational education and training. It could be explained by the fact that the form of the relationships between employers and workers, as well as the co-operation between social partners and educational institutions, are completely new and did not exist in the previous system.

Among the most significant positive developments one should note a) the representation of social partner organisations - the Latvian Confederation of Employers and the Free Trade Union Federation - in the working group on the development of a new draft law and a new concept of vocational education and training; b) their participation in the National Educational Council as well as in the newly established Tripartite Consultative Council on Adult Education.

The social partner organisations have co-operation projects with foreign partners in different countries and this has helped the reform of the vocational system in Latvia.

The report highlights that the reinforcement of the social partners' role in vocational education and training is linked to the promotion of entrepreneurship in the country and the development of a unified vocational system linked to the general education system.

The report finally points out the usefulness of having programmes to train the social partners in how to improve the social dialogue. The number of people experienced in this area in Latvia is very limited. Study visits for representatives of employers and employees to European Union organisations could help improve the situation.

Lithuania

During the first years of independence (1991-1993), the attempts to design a mechanism which could ensure harmonious development of economy and vocational training and education systems were unsuccessful. However, by 1994, when different employer organisations were established and gained strength, and when structures initiated by trade unions took shape, the role of the social partners became more and more important in the development of a vocational training system in Lithuania.

It can be said that, today in Lithuania, all the legal and normative conditions for social dialogue at all levels (national, county, region/city, and enterprise) have been fulfilled. Tripartite structures have been functioning at various institutions from as early as 1992.

Obviously, social partnership is a new phenomenon in Lithuania, and therefore it is to be expected that different obstacles have to be overcome and that optimal solutions or universally satisfactory outcomes are not always found.

A major problem in the development of the vocational education and training system in Lithuania is uncertainty about future economic development, which is typical of countries in the process of transition. Research carried out by the Institute of Labour and Social Research in 1995-1996 indicates that many of the heads of Lithuanian companies have only a vague vision of their future and plan their activities only a year or two in advance. In such a situation, developing a close relationship between vocational training institutions and the social partners is the only possible means of ensuring the provision of trained specialists to match the needs of the economy.

The role of the social partners has recently been promoted through the legal establishment of the tripartite Lithuanian Council of Vocational Training. The law determines that the Council has an expert, advisory and counselling role and that its decisions will be approved by the Government on recommendation from the Ministers of Education and Science and Social Security and Labour.

Another effective expression of influence of the social partners over the system of vocational education and training is to be found through the tripartite committees operating at regional level.

Despite some progress the involvement of the social partners is still weak in certain areas, in particular with regard to vocational training and links with training institutions which are random and inconsistent.

There is however a growing awareness that the role of the social partners is becoming more and more important in the strive for quality and efficiency within vocational education and training. The essence of this principle is the systematic monitoring of links between corresponding areas, and the essential factor for its successful implementation is to define and ensure the joint responsibility of the social partners (the state, employers and employees, training institutions and their founders) for the planning of labour market training activities, and the development of programmes, their quality and implementation.

Poland

Transformations of the Polish economy and resulting changes in the Polish labour market led to broad changes in the vocational training system. Despite the fact that there appears to be a broad consensus on the fundamental role to be played by the social partners in the development of vocational training, their actual role is still quite weak and the Government remains the main player in this area.

Social dialogue takes place mainly within the Tripartite Commission for Social and Economic Policies and the National, Regional and Local Employment Councils. The most important issues that are addressed by the above tripartite bodies are: employment and job creation policies; privatisation and restructuring of state-owned enterprises; and the reforms of the social security system.

The Tripartite Commission for Social and Economic Policies was established in 1992. It was intended to be the leading forum for the social dialogue. The Commission also provides the framework for collective bargaining negotiations and covers the area of vocational training. However, due to the lack of experience with regard to the functioning and the role of such institutions in the free market economy and the resulting limited ability of the social partners to engage in a meaningful dialogue and to reach binding agreements, the decisions of the Commission are frequently influenced by the government.

Another tripartite institution that plays a key role in the system of vocational education at all levels is the Employment Council. The Employment Council has its representation at the national, regional, and local levels. At each level the employment councils function as advisory bodies. Their opinions do however, influence both the policy and the decision making process with respect to the labour laws, the allocation of Labour Fund resources, and the employment related training at all levels of their involvement. The impact of social partners' participation in these bodies varies depending on their ability to develop positive working relationships with the other partners.

The development perspective of social partnership is seen to be determined by a number of factors such as the progress in the structural economic changes (in particular the privatisation process), the heterogeneous and overlapping interests of groups, sectors and regions, the multiplicity of often conflicting legal regulations and provisions, the lack of tradition of formal and informal reconciliation of interests between social groups.

The difficulties are further compounded by the fact that the organisations representing both the employers' and workers' are fragmented and not homogenous. While such a situation, might be the result of the so called "exercise in an early democracy" it complicates the social dialogue. Moreover, aside from the Negotiating and Consulting Centres developed and operated by NSZZ Solidarnosc, neither the trade unions nor employers, businesses, or craft chambers have developed administrative structures, and/or efficient mechanisms for funding or the development of expert capacity needed to secure their participation in the context of institutionalised social partnership. Consequently, their capacity to represent and to engage in a meaningful social dialogue is often insufficient and their legitimisation unstable.

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Romania

The economic and social transformations that have taken place in Romania since 1990, and especially the emergence of the private and semi-private sector have generated new requirements within vocational education and training, and especially its responsiveness to labour market needs.

In the new social context, a vocational training system orientated towards the development of human resources in line with market needs represents a key element for sustainable economic and social development.

Within a society characterised by rapid change and a multiplication of economic and social issues, the strengthening of links between the training system and the labour market calls for the development of social partnership.

The effective participation of the social partners in the planning, implementation, and assessment of the vocational training system implies both a new perspective on the distribution of power and responsibility, and important changes in the field of legislation, social structures and mentalities.

Even though the period 1990-98 did see the promotion of legal and institutional changes providing for the involvement of the social partners in vocational education and training, social partnership in Romania is only beginning to emerge. Consequently their effective participation is quite limited.

The pilot programmes developed in the field of initial and continuing training with the support of Phare and other international organisations, have, to a great extent, provided an impetus for the promotion of social partnership in vocational training.

Within the framework of these programmes, the social partners are mainly represented in advisory structures, and they function on a tripartite basis.

The development of social partnership in Romania is a gradual process dependent on the overall pace of economic and social transformation. Moreover, it is influenced by a number of factors including in particular improvements in legislation and the institutional framework.

Slovak Republic

The principal framework for tripartite negotiation, on a national level, is the Council for Economic and Social Agreement (RHSD). As in other countries, membership includes, based on the parity principle, leading representatives of the Federation of Employers' Organisations and Associations (AZZZ), the Confederation of Trade Unions (KOZ) and of the economic ministers. It is chaired by the Vice-President of the Government, who is responsible for economic and social policy.

Sectoral tripartite councils are structured along similar lines and include representatives of sectoral employers' associations, trade unions and the relevant ministries.

Working conditions and wages seem to be the central issues in the social dialogue. Despite the fact that the development of vocational education and training is not yet a priority item on the agenda of the above mentioned tripartite bodies, certain forms of social partnership exist in various areas. There are several cooperative bodies active, at national level, in defining the requirements and standards for initial training. These are:

1. The Council for Vocational Education, which is attached to the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic; the original idea that the Council would have a substantial influence on vocational education and training reform has not yet been accomplished. Since its inception, it has concentrated on the issue of the Secondary Apprentice Schools but has failed to find a systematic solution to the central problem of financing these schools in the current situation of economic transition.
2. Sectoral groups and professional commissions for the development and evaluation of general and vocational curricula. Their main duty is to organise curriculum development, in specific subject areas, to assess proposals and submit them for approval to the Ministry of Education. They have a good basis for becoming a forum for social partnership, not only in the area of apprentice training but also in that of continuing vocational training for adults.
3. The inter-sectoral coordination group on the development of occupational standards and the design of secondary vocational education and training standards. It originated as a consultative body of the Minister of Labour, Social Affairs and Family. Its main tasks are to assist in the process of setting up an information system on occupations, adapting the contents of vocational training to labour market requirements and developing occupational and educational standards for vocational education and training.

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Slovenia

The idea of a new vocational education and training system based on the active participation of social partners was accepted at the beginning of the 1990s. In 1996, new vocational education and training legislation was ratified in parliament and the restructuring and modernisation of vocational education and training started with the support of the Phare Programme. The implementation of the latter has had a great impact on the development of social partnership in this area. The new curricula, developed by the tripartite expert groups within the framework of the Phare Programme represent an integral part of the national vocational education and training reform.

The most important partners in vocational education and training in Slovenia are the chambers, trade unions and the state. The state is primarily represented by the Ministry of Education and Sport, and, in recent years, the Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs has also taken over a large of the work.

Under the new legislation establishing social partnership in vocational education and training, social partners in recent years have started playing an important role, mainly through their participation in tripartite - decision-making and/or advisory - bodies on the national level (Council of Experts of the Republic of Slovenia for Vocational and Professional Education; Curriculum Council for Vocational Education and Training). They have also been actively involved in some concrete activities, including:

- implementing the dual system of vocational education and training which is adjusted to the needs of big companies as well as SMEs in some sectors, in particular, wood processing, construction and car-repairing;
- preparation of about sixty occupational standards, although even in this area the role of the employees has been too small and needs to be improved;
- the Chambers also play a role in continuing training and the setting up of the "national certification system";
- the unions and Chambers appoint their representatives on examination committees for vocational schools; and
- social partners in some regions have started to play a significant role in establishing links between vocational education and training, the labour market and human resources development.

However, social partnership is still at the initial development stage and needs to be further reinforced in the future. There are still a lot of areas where the social partners are not adequately involved. The links between the educational sphere and the working sphere are insufficient. The social partners should be more involved in discussions about the low level of qualifications of the employed and the unemployed and about the training of drop-outs from the education system. The system of assessment and accreditation of qualifications should be developed to facilitate the acquisition of a qualification without taking part in a training course. For this to happen, professional bodies or trade committees composed of the social partners ought to be developed.

Further support in the form of training would be required in particular in the direction of trade union staff and members for improving their awareness about their role as social partners in vocational education and training.

ANNEX - CONTRIBUTORS

This report was written on the basis of contributions from the following:

Haralabous Frangoulis	European Training Foundation
Jean-Marie Luttringer	CIRCE, France
Liliana Dobroslavska, Krassimir Detchev	Bulgaria
Jaromir Coufalik, Jan Bucki, Jioi Valenta	Czech Republic
Ilmar Link, Tiia Tali Tiina Annus	Estonia
Agnes Gyarmati-Racz, Maria Lado, Adrianna Soos, Istvan Wentzel	Hungary
Inese Pukaine, Irena Rudzate, Baiba Ramina, Inta Paeglite	Latvia
Boguslavas Gruzevskis, Aurimas Morkunas, Diana Paukstiene	Lithuania
Jerzy- Pawel Gieorgica	Poland
Madlen Serban, Eleonora Radulescu, Dan Loan Vaideanu, Felicia Zarojanu, Doina Mesteacan, Rada Oana, Laurentiu Andronic	Romania
Miroslav Stanojevic, Martina Trbanc, Veronica Slander	Slovenia

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E-mail: jean.de.lannoy@infobord.be
URL: http://www.jean-de-lannoy.be

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